

# How the American Community Survey Improves Census Statistics

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The American Community Survey (ACS) is ushering in the most substantial change in the decennial census in more than 60 years. The American Community Survey is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, housing, social and economic data every year.

Recent censuses have consisted of a “short form” and a “long form.” The short form included basic questions about age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship and owner/renter status. The long form was sent to a sample of housing units and people living in group quarters and included additional detailed questions about socioeconomic and housing characteristics.

The ongoing American Community Survey has replaced the decennial census long form in 2010 and thereafter by collecting long form-type information throughout the decade rather than once every 10 years.

Here are some of the reasons why the American Community Survey has improved census statistics:

- 1. A Short Form-Only 2010 Census Streamlined Decennial Operations.** Counting every man, woman and child living in the United States once — and only once — and in the right place, is a daunting undertaking. Without the long form, all households received a short form in the 2010 Census. It's just 10 questions that take about 10 minutes to answer. Not only did filling out the census take less time overall, but follow-up interviews with households that didn't mail back the form were faster, too.
- 2. Professional Year-Round American Community Survey Interviewers Can Obtain More Accurate and Complete Responses.** The tight timeframes of the decennial census are not conducive to detailed long-form data gathering. The year-round American Community Survey interviewers have in-depth knowledge of the survey questions. They use that knowledge to elicit more accurate responses from the people they interview. And without the pressure of the short decennial time frame, they are also more likely to get more *complete* survey responses.
- 3. ACS Data Are More Current Than the Old Long-Form Data.** Under the old system, long-form data were collected at the beginning of each decade. Like a snapshot that becomes increasingly faded with age, the value of long-form data diminished with each passing year — as did the relevance of the data. While American Community Survey data are not as *precise* as the long-form data — the margins of error are generally higher — they are more *current* and therefore more relevant.

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